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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the usefulness of an online writing lab, Smarthinking, in a college writing tutorial program. The study investigated 4 issues: what Smarthinking is and how it works; what students think of the program; what instructors think of the program; and whether Smarthinking is cohesive with writing center principles and procedures. A total of 97 anonymous responses were received to a survey of students and writing center tutors. Results indicated that: (1) students reacted positively to the program and would utilize it in the future; (2) instructors were positive but noncommittal about utilizing the program and offered several improvement suggestions; and (3) Smarthinking does not coincide with the interpersonal interaction characteristic of the writing center. Findings suggest that while Smarthinking provides good editorial service, the educational value for developing writers using such a program may be minimal. Additional research is needed to develop an interactive, explanative, in-depth online tutorial component for programs like Smarthinking. (Contains 26 references. Appendixes contain survey instruments, interview questions, and graphs of data.) (EF)

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Smarthinking.com – Online Writing Lab or Jiffy-Editing Service?

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16 May 2000

CS 217 063

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My Interest in the Subject

I work as a tutor in the Modesto Junior College (MJC) Writing Center (WC). I began working in the WC five semesters ago on the recommendation of an English instructor and have since become a mentor and worked as the assistant to the instructor. Due to this lengthy stay in the WC and all that I have learned there combined with my interest in computers and the Internet, I was fascinated to learn of the online writing lab, Smarthinking.

One of the first lessons I learned in the Writing Center is that there are, indeed, different types of students (i.e. visual learners vs. auditory learners, English as a second language students vs. native speakers, learning disabled or developmentally delayed students vs. "normal" students). The second half of that lesson is not all students should be approached in the same manner. This is not a matter of discrimination; it is a matter of meeting students' various needs. Thus, part of my interest in the Smarthinking program resided in how, or if, the online tutors approach this situation.

Throughout my time in the Writing Center, I have had the opportunity to research the practices and policies of many writing centers. One policy that I have seen in many, if not all, writing centers is that students are not allowed to simply drop a paper off and return for it later; students are required to sit through the proofreading process and discuss their writing with the tutors. Although this requires more time and less convenience for the student, over time, it helps him/her to become a better writer. I believe this long-term objective, rather than helping with just one paper, is the goal of most writing centers. This belief created a second part of my interest in the Smarthinking program: Is it possible for the creators of Smarthinking to avoid the stereotype of being an editing service?

At one time, there was talk of creating an online tutoring service, which would be collaborative with the work already being done by tutors, through the MJC Writing Center.

Because, in our eyes, interactive discussion is a major part of tutoring, we spent much time trying to decide how we could utilize the Internet for tutoring without losing the student-tutor interaction. We discussed the possibility of utilizing chat programs (PowWow by Tribal Voice or ICQ) or building our homepage on Homestead, a site builder that offers free chat rooms. However, with the introduction of Smarthinking, all such plans were cast aside because someone had created an online writing lab for us. This lead to my third interest in the Smarthinking program: Could the online tutors interact with their students through this program and, if so, how would they go about it?

I spend an average of fifteen hours per week online. During that time, I take part in a discussion group about the author John Saul, help new users in the chat program PowWow, associate with various friends, work on my homepage, and visit various sites. In a world that is seemingly dominated by the computer industry, people can now purchase all kinds of products and services online. Thus, my final area of interest in the Smarthinking program stemmed from my interest in the Internet. In his article "Against the Wind," Craig Vetter claims, "Most students, even the good ones, can't write a lick, not a love letter or a suicide note, much less an essay or a term paper. It's nothing new, but according to the teachers who have to read this crap for a living, the further we get into the computer era, the worse it's becoming" (Vetter 1). The obvious question to arise from this claim is "how does this belief affect the Smarthinking program?" If utilizing computers is causing students' writing skills to decrease, is an online writing lab a feasible solution to poor or bad writing?

Basically, I was interested in the Smarthinking program because of my own curiosity. Whether I am considering procedure, policy, interaction or Craig Vetter's claim, Smarthinking seemed to run contradictory to many of the basic principles (i.e. interaction and not editing) to

which most writing centers adhere. Therefore, I had a deep interest in finding the strengths, flaws and basic student and instructor opinions of the service.

Questions for Exploration

I had many interests in the Smarthinking program. I wondered how, or if, the online tutors differentiated between various types of students, how they avoided the editing service stereotype, how, or if, they interacted with students, and whether an online writing lab was a realistic solution to poor writing skills. Because my interest in the Smarthinking program stemmed from many areas, I had many questions:

1. What exactly is Smarthinking and how does it work?
2. What do students think of the program?
3. What do instructors think of the program?
4. Is Smarthinking an online writing lab or a jiffy-editing service?

Prior to researching the Smarthinking program, I felt that it seemed to run contradictory to the basic policies and procedures embraced by most writing centers and effective writing instructors. My overall question was whether or not the Smarthinking program would really help students become better writers.

Findings and Discussion

My many questions necessitated surveys and interviews of many people. To gain further information about the service itself, I explored its homepage, enrolled in the program and sent in several essays (see my opinions in the Conclusions section). To research what students think of the Smarthinking program, I generated two student surveys (see appendix A and C) and interviewed four student users (see Appendix D). To research what instructors think of the Smarthinking program, I conducted several interviews (see appendix E).

What is Smarthinking?

According to the Smarthinking homepage, Smarthinking is "a Washington, D.C.-based educational organization, [which] provides students in higher education with real-time tutoring through [its] online environment" (Think Smart 1). According to Smarthinking's homepage, the program "provide[s] online, real-time academic support for higher education students taking core courses. Smarthinking understands that education is about people and is facilitating learning by connecting learners to e-structors" (Smarthinking 1). The goal of Smarthinking is to "allow students to choose the assistance they need, when they need it." The Online Writing Lab "offers students personalized assistance within 24 hours in such areas as improved writing technique, paper critiques, and editing tips" (Educational Services 1). The mission of the program is to "supplement institutions' academic support systems to better serve the changing needs of today's students" (About Us 1). However, as noted in the Education Services page of the Smarthinking homepage, "Smarthinking is not designed to replace traditional college assistance programs -- or traditional college courses. Instead, it serves as a supplement, in most cases, to existing tutoring programs" (1). By "revolutionizing education," (About Us 1) the creators of Smarthinking "are making education more accessible than it has ever been" (Education Services 1). Smarthinking is currently running its pilot program "with 25 schools in four countries and 14 states and the District of Columbia -- providing real-time support for over 8,000 students in mathematics and writing. It is [Smarthinking's] goal to expand [the] service to all core knowledge areas in higher education and serve the roughly 3,600 higher education institutions across the country" (Smarthinking: It's How You Know 2). With their mission and goal now clear, I had to wonder who exactly was behind the screen.

What is an e-structor?

The online tutors working for the Smarthinking program are called e-structors. They "have substantial experience in tutoring and/or teaching in their given field and participate in a robust online training program and tutorial practicum" (Education Services 1). Curious about the exact credentials of the e-structors, I clicked the link to see the precise credentials required to become an e-structor. The e-structors work from anywhere they have Internet access and are paid between eight and fifteen dollars per hour. Qualifications are as follows: "Candidates must have Internet access, and be able to demonstrate proficiency in the area they wish to tutor. Applicants currently enrolled in school must have earned a B or above in the subjects they wish to tutor, and have at least a 3.0 GPA overall. Tutors must be available to work 6 or more hours a week" (Join the Smarthinking Team 1). Thus, according to the information gathered from the Smarthinking homepage, many people are qualified enough to become e-structors. These people range from junior college to graduate students and elementary, junior high, high school, or college instructors.

However, in an e-mail message, Beth Hewett, Smarthinking's online writing lab's coordinator, wrote that the qualifications to become an e-structor have changed since January when the "Join Our Team" page was posted. Hewett clarified the current qualifications: "Most of our e-structors have a Master's Degree or Ph.D.; some have several advanced degrees and everyone has coursework beyond the Bachelor's Degree. Everyone has writing-specific training and experience as a college teacher and/or tutor. These are qualifications that we use when screening and interviewing prospective e-structors; beyond hiring, everyone experiences an intensive training period and frequent evaluations" (Hewett 1). This update in qualifications

narrows the number of qualified applicants. Now that it was clear who is behind the screen of Smarthinking, the next question was how the program worked.

How does Smarthinking work?

In a society dominated by computers, the user-friendliness of programs is highly valued. To prompt use by more students, it is especially important for student programs to be easily accessible. The Smarthinking program sounded simple enough, so I proceeded to enroll myself.

The first thing a student has to do is log onto the Internet. Then he/she types the following address into his/her browser: http://smarthinking.com. When the Smarthinking homepage loads, the student clicks the button marked login and chooses whether he/she is a first-time user or registered user. A registered user clicks the appropriate button and proceeds to enter his/her user name and password. A first-time user clicks the appropriate link and proceeds to set up an account. The first thing he/she has to do is enter his/her school's name and password. Then he/she has to agree to the user license. Next a new screen loads where the student has to enter his/her name, preferred user name, password, e-mail address, etc. When finished with this process, the student is taken to the login page (where registered users immediately go) and is prompted to enter his/her user name and password. At this point, a new screen loads, greeting the student by name and allowing him/her to choose where he/she wants to go (i.e. the online writing lab).

To submit a paper to the e-structors, a student clicks the link to the online writing lab. At this point, another screen loads. The student then scrolls to the bottom to click the link to submit a document. When the new screen loads, he/she enters the name of the document, the instructor's prompt, chooses what he/she wants the e-structor to read for (i.e. organization, development, grammar, syntax, strengths, etc), browses for the appropriate document and clicks "submit."

Within twenty-four hours, the student logs back into Smarthinking (this time as a registered user) and clicks the link to the online writing lab where he/she can retrieve comments and a marked-up version of his/her document.

What do students think of Smarthinking? (The results of the first survey)

The first survey I generated was distributed by instructors to students in two English 50 classes and among the tutors in the WC who had utilized the service. I received sixty-five anonymous responses.

The first question on the survey asked students to rate the overall experience on a scale of one to ten, one being poor, ten being wonderful. One student rated the experience a 1, zero students rated it a 2, two rated it a 3, zero students rated it a 4, six rated it a 5, four rated it a 6, eight rated it a 7, nineteen rated it an 8, fifteen rated it a 9 and ten rated it a 10. (For a visual distribution of ratings, see Graph A on appendix B.) The student who rated the experience a 1 noted, "I couldn't get it to work although it seemed easy enough" (Student Survey participant 7). This response is demonstrative of many of the students who could not access the program. One student who rated the experience a 10 praised the service saying, "I liked the fact that they tell you what you did wrong and also give you advice on how it would sound better" (Student Survey participant 6). This response is demonstrative of those students who had no trouble accessing the program.

The second question on the student survey asked the students to rate the helpfulness of the e-structor on the same scale. Zero students rated the e-structor a 1 or 2, one rated him/her a 3, two rated him/her a 4, four rated him/her a 5, two rated him/her a 6, eight rated him/her a 7, eighteen rated him/her an 8, seventeen rated him/her a 9, and thirteen rated him/her a 10. (For a visual distribution of ratings, see Graph B on Appendix B.) One student justified his/her rating

by saying that the service is "good but I would rather have something explained to me" (Student Survey participant 52). The lack of explanation/discussion seems to be one of the main things students felt negatively about. One student who rated the e-structor a 10, explained that the e-structor "stated what needed to be improved and gave her [the e-structor's] example of what could make it better" (Student Survey participant 4). Many students who gave the e-structor a high rating gave similar explanations.

The third question asked the students to rate the service on convenience. One student rated the convenience a 1, zero students rated it a 2, one rated it a 3, one rated it a 4, three rated it a 5, two rated it a 6, eight rated it a 7, sixteen rated it an 8, thirteen rated it a 9, and twenty rated it a 10. (For a visual distribution of ratings, see Graph C on Appendix B.) One student explained his/her low rating by noting, "the service is not so convenient for me [because] I do not own a computer" (Student Survey participant 2). Although MJC does have computers for student use, this does not necessarily increase convenience for students without computers. However, for those students with computers and Internet access at home, the service was rated high on convenience because, as many students noted, "I could access it anytime I need[ed] it" (Student Survey participant 10).

The next question on the survey asked students to list what flaws, if any, they saw in the Smarthinking program. Forty-three students responded that they saw no flaws in the program. Two students noted that they experienced difficulty due to the e-structor's lack of familiarity/understanding with/of the assignment. One student claimed that one flaw exists in the mark-up of the essay being interrupting. One student complained that there is no way to resubmit his/her essay to the same e-structor. Two students felt that e-structors should not mark grammar errors unless asked to do so. Two students complained about the program being impersonal. Six

students did not like the fact that there is no interaction/discussion between the student and the tutor, and five students felt there is a flaw in the lack of instant feedback and being forced to wait twenty-four hours for the answer to a question.

Students were then asked to list the strengths, if any, of the program. Nine students saw no strengths in the program. Sixteen students liked the convenience of the service. Five students enjoyed the anonymity of submission and lack of interaction. Twenty-four students felt that the e-structors helped with the essay they had submitted.

Question number seven on the student survey asked students if they prefer Smarthinking or face-to-face tutoring. Twenty-seven students noted that they preferred online tutoring. Reasons for this reply varied. Two students felt that the Smarthinking program was less intimidating than face-to-face tutoring. Two replied that they felt less stupid due to the anonymity of submission. Sixteen preferred online tutoring because of the issue of time. One student liked the input he/she received, one valued the honesty and one enjoyed the grammar help he/she received from the e-structor. Two students preferred online tutoring because of the quiet environment, two liked the lack of human contact and two valued the intelligence of the e-structors.

Twenty-six students preferred face-to-face tutoring to Smarthinking. The reasons for these replies were also greatly varied. Four students did not like the twenty-four hour waiting period that comes with the Smarthinking program. Four students preferred face-to-face tutoring because they were able to ask questions, and six students preferred it because of having the ability to discuss their essays with tutors. Six students valued the explanations received from face-to-face tutors. One student felt that familiarity was important and lacking in the Smarthinking program. One student felt the Smarthinking program was impersonal and one

student questioned the credentials of the e-structors. One student felt that encouragement is important and impossible through Smarthinking, and one student preferred face-to-face tutoring simply because it is an experienced method. Eleven students noted that both types of tutoring had advantages and disadvantages and offered no preference. (For a visual distribution of responses, see Graph D on Appendix B.)

When asked if they would utilize the online tutoring service again, forty-eight students responded in the affirmative, four students replied in the negative, and thirteen students were undecided. (A visual distribution appears in Graph E on Appendix B.) Participant 19 decided he/she would not use Smarthinking again because he/she "like[s] face-to-face tutoring much better." Many of the affirmative responses were explained by "I liked it" (multiple participants), but participant 34 explained the e-structors "help me write a better paper and [I] can get a better grade."

Students were also asked what suggestions they had for improvement of the Smarthinking program. Five students noted that they would like to see faster responses. Three students felt the login process should be simplified. Student Survey participant 1 thinks "they should have these services available in all subjects." Participant 18 suggested the program should "show patterns of errors and how to correct them," and participant 26 thought the program would be better if the e-structors gave "more positive comments." Four students felt there should be more interaction between the student and the e-structor, and participant 28 noted "they should let the students know… the qualifications of the e-structor who reads [their] paper."

What do students think of Smarthinking? (The results of the follow-up survey)

The follow-up student survey received thirty-two anonymous responses. Four responses were from students in a high level English elective course and the other twenty-eight were from

students in English 50. Twenty-three respondents are native English speakers and nine are non-native English speakers.

When asked how many times they had used Smarthinking without being instructed to do so, ten students marked that they had not, eleven students had only used it once, nine had used it two to three times and two had used it more than three times. (For a graph representing this information, see Graph 1 on Appendix D.) The survey then asked the students how often they intend to use Smarthinking next semester. Five students marked that they would not use it, six marked that they would use it one or two times, five marked that they would use it three to five times, four marked that they would use it five to ten times, nine noted that they would use it consistently and three were unsure how often they would use it. (For a graph representing this information, see Graph 2 on Appendix D.)

The final two questions on the follow-up survey were asked to discover what, if anything, the students were learning from Smarthinking. First, the students were asked what kinds of comments they were seeing on their papers. Three students marked focus, seven marked organization, ten marked development, eight marked grammar and four gave no response. (For a graph representing this information, see Graph 3 on Appendix D.) The students were then asked to name things they were learning from the e-structors' comments. Nine students did not respond to this question. Of the twenty-three who did answer, twelve noted that they had learned something pertaining to grammar. Four students were learning about developing their essays (participants 5, 14, 15, and 20), two were learning to focus their essays (participants 7 and 11), and two were learning to organize their essays (participants 9 and 19). Two students noted that they were not learning anything (participants 30 and 31).

What do students think of Smarthinking? (The results of the personal interviews)

To receive a more personal idea of what students thought of the Smarthinking program, I interviewed four students. (To view the interview questions, see Appendix E.) All four students are in a high level English elective class and began using Smarthinking on the rough draft of their papers. Participants 2, 3, and 4 have used Smarthinking more than three times and participant 1 has used it two to three times. When asked what kinds of comments were most prominent on their essays, participant 1 marked development and grammar, participant 2 marked grammar, participant 3 marked all four areas -- focus, organization, development and grammar -- and participant 4 marked focus, organization and development.

The participants were then asked what they do with the comments they receive. Participant 1 did not use them because he/she felt they were irrelevant. Participant 2 decided they were useless because they were about grammar and he/she was still working on early drafts. Participant 3 makes "changes where they are needed in the document," and participant 4 reads them to decide whether or not he/she agrees with them. He/she also noted, "some of the comments have not even been related to the prompt or writing assignment."

The next question asked the participants what they were learning from Smarthinking. Participants 1, 2 and 3 do not think they are learning anything. Participant 4 noted "Having someone else, objectively, look at your document is a good idea. This way, you know if you are writing to your audience and if you are clear."

The next two questions asked the students what they like and dislike about the Smarthinking program. Participant 1 likes the "instant gratification" and dislikes the lack of interaction. Participant 2 likes the twenty-four hour wait but dislikes that "it is hard to submit essays." Although participant 3 likes the "chance to hear outside comments," he/she thinks "they

make too many uneccessary [sic] comments." Participant 4 noted that when the comments are "on target" they are helpful, but he/she dislikes that sometimes "the comments… are not even related to the writing assignment."

Participants were then asked if they would submit documents to Smarthinking in the future. Participant 1 said "no" because "I didn't find it helpful." Participant 2 said "no… because of the fact it is hard to submit an essay… and they rarely comment on what I need looked at." Participant 3 said "yes because I rely on any commentary on my essays." Participant 4 said "yes… it is a good tool to utilize, but you must be careful when evaluating the comments."

Finally, the participants were asked what suggestions, if any, they had for improving the Smarthinking program. Participants 1 and 3 had no suggestions. Participant 2 suggested "that the tutor… only focus on what [he/she] is being asked to look at." Participant 4 would like to see "a better variety of tutors" because he/she "keep[s] getting the same few to read [his/her] papers."

What do students think of Smarthinking? (A personal response)

Thus far I have submitted three essays to Smarthinking's e-structors. For the first essay, the e-structor offered many comments, most of which left me confused or argumentative. He/she either misread or misunderstood my prompt because he/she asked me to add a summary of the book to which I was responding even though my instructor had asked me not to do so. He/she suggested that I "be sure that all of the information in the body of [my] text relates to [my] thesis" (e-structor A). However, he/she never explained where my focus strayed. The e-structor also questions whether or not the examples I used related to my personal life, but he/she did not clarify to which examples he/she was referring. Furthermore, he/she suggested that I "be consistent in my documentation style" (e-structor A). As I reviewed my paper, I saw that I was consistent, leaving me confused as to his/her point in this suggestion. Most frustrating though

was the e-structor's suggestion that I change some of my word usage. He/she actually edited his/her suggestion into my document noting that his/her suggestion was clearer. However, it was not clearer because it changed my meaning completely. On a positive note, he/she did note a few grammar errors and typos that I did need to change.

My second experience with Smarthinking was with an article response. I submitted two drafts of this paper. I was able to utilize a few comments from the first draft and added some detail and clarity to my essay. However, the e-structor suggested I conclude my essay with questions that I was left with because "often the most interesting conclusions do not conclude anything, but rather leave the reader with some challenging thinking" (e-structor B). While he/she may be correct in some ways, I had to consider that most academic essays do not allow for new information to be introduced in the conclusion. The comments on the second draft were helpful in that they gave me some new thoughts and allowed me to add more development.

My third experience with Smarthinking was when I submitted an incomplete rough draft of a research paper. Instead of focusing on the concepts I asked him/her to look for (focus, organization and development), the e-structor commented solely on my grammar errors, most of which were typographical errors.

My most recent experience with Smarthinking was when I submitted the first draft of this paper. This was, by far, my most negative experience with Smarthinking. Not only were the e-structor's comments lacking in objectivity, the incorporation of the answers to the questions the e-structor asked would have left my paper off focus. While I understand it is difficult to maintain complete objectivity when reading a paper that criticizes the program one works for, I expected more professionalism. There were a few comments that provided me areas to strengthen my

arguments, but, for the most part, the comments were irrelevant and based solely on defense instead of helping me as a writer.

What do instructors think of the Smarthinking program?

The only way to answer this question was to go directly to the instructors who had their students submit essays to Smarthinking. I generated interview questions and made appointments with a few of the instructors whose students had submitted documents to Smarthinking. (For the questions used in the interviews, see Appendix F.) Participant 1 teaches English 49, participant 2 teaches English 50 and participant 3 teaches a high-level English elective course.

Participant 1 required his/her students to submit documents to Smarthinking twice. Participant 2 has required it once officially and numerous times unofficially. Participant 3 has required it several times. All collected the e-structors' comments. Participant 1 noted that the e-structors most commonly commented on focus and organization. Participant 2 responded that the e-structors commented mostly on focus because focus was what he/she asked them to look at. Participant 3 did not respond to the question regarding which comments were most prominent.

The instructors were then asked what they believe their students are learning about their writing that they can utilize now and in the future. Participant 1 responded, "how to translate 'English teacherese.' … They may also be learning that there are real people out there genuinely interested and responsive to their writing – it is not just a one-teacher/one-student academic thing." Participant 2 feels that his/her students are learning "a sense of audience" and how to write reader-based prose instead of writer-based prose." Participant 3 believes the amount and content of learning varies depending on the student. He/she notes that while some "seem to become more aware of various elements such as organization, focus, or development," others "don't LEARN much of anything." He/she also notes that his/her students have told him/her

"they haven't learned much of anything that can be used on a paper other than the one they are currently writing."

The next two questions asked the instructors what they like and dislike about the Smarthinking program. Participant 1 likes that the e-structors are "selective and not indiscriminate in their comments," but he/she dislikes that they "misunderstand the prompt." Participant 2 likes the convenience of Smarthinking but dislikes the lack of interaction and the marked-up essay (He/she sees this as editing.). Participant 3 likes the way the service "helps writers see how others perceive their ideas," but he/she dislikes the editing with little or no explanation, the focus on surface errors when the content needs revision, the incorrect grammar corrections, the lack of interaction, and the fact that e-structors cannot check for learning. Participant 3 believes that "checking for learning is an integral part of an effective student-centered tutoring session."

Participants were then asked how often, if at all, future students would be required to submit papers to Smarthinking. Participant 1 said "probably so," but he/she does not know how often they will be required to do so. Participant 2 will require his/her students to submit papers "once or twice based on need" because it "makes the final grading process much easier." Participant 3 will "probably" require it "from first draft through final draft" because "it does cause the writers to get drafts in on time, gives writers a sense of how others see their papers, and causes writers to think critically about the responses and therefore become more engaged with their own work."

The final question asked participants what suggestions, if any, they had for improving the program. Participant 1 did not have any suggestions. Participant 2 suggested the "students be able to contact the e-structors for interaction." Participant 3 offered the following suggestions:

1. Work with a true W.C. philosophy! FOD and logic first and only in a rough draft, grammar last.
2. Don't be so directive. This makes an already tutor-centered session even more tutor-centered. Ask more questions.
3. Don't change already correct word usage to a word the tutor likes better.
4. Don't rewrite complete sentences into the students' text. This creates an environment ripe for plagiarism.

Does Smarthinking run contrary to basic writing center principles/procedures?

One of my first interests in Smarthinking's online writing lab was that it seemed to run contradictory to the basic writing center policy of interaction with an objective of improving students as writers. To decide whether or not this is true, I posted a message to the writing center list serve and read a few tutor-training texts.

The writing center list serve is a way in which writing center directors and tutors or other interested people may post messages and respond to others via e-mail. My post to the writing center list serve was as follows: "Do any of you in writing centers allow students to drop off papers, leave the center, and return to pick up an 'edited' paper (or a paper with comments on it) in a few hours? No personal student contact or collaboration with a tutor or peer consultant is involved in this type of process. Please explain the reason(s) you do or do not allow this." This question prompted many responses.

David Shein of Bard noted such a service is not available in his writing center because "tutoring is a species of student development. … We are interested in producing better students, not better papers. Until someone can show me the developmental value of acting as a copy-editing service, we will continue to refuse to act as one" (Shein 1). Joan Hawthorn of the

University of North Dakota emphasizes this idea by writing, "our rationale [for not permitting such a process] has to do with wanting to work with rather than for the writer. Or I could say 'with writers rather than with papers'" (Hawthorn 1). Hawthorn also posed the following question: Studies show that a high percent of teacher comments blow right by the student – why would we want to do more of the same?" Clyde Moneyhun of the University of Delaware explained his "no" by writing, "editing papers runs counter to everything we believe in. We are not an editing service. We are writing teachers" (Moneyhun 1). Shannin Schroeder, a writing consultant, wrote that she once had a student ask her if he could follow such a process. She explained to him they "weren't a drive-thru service and that the quality of [her] work, like that of food in fast food settings, would suffer if it were treated as such" (Schroeder 1). David Sheridan wrote that he does not work at a writing center that offers such a service, but he also mentioned that online tutoring does offer such a service. He went on to write, "while it's easy to think of disadvantages to this kind of conference, there are advantages too. Written comments, for instance, can be read and re-read at the writer's leisure; the tutor can choose his or her words more carefully, and can revise them; the tutor can develop his or her thoughts without being interrupted by defensive comments or explanations from the writer, etc" (Sheridan 1). However, he indicated the importance of dialogue/interaction by adding the following comment: "Dialogue is facilitated by applications like Redline which allow the tutor to comment in the margins of a paper posted to the web and then allow the writer to comment back in the same space" (Sheridan 1).

When questioned about a source for the assumption that writing centers do not offer a drop-off service and required students to sit through a proofreading session, I searched for support in various tutor-training texts because they should be a credible source for information

regarding writing center policies. To my surprise, many of the texts I looked through offered chapters regarding online tutoring.

Toni-Lee Caposella's The Harcourt Brace Guide to Peer Tutoring poses more questions than answers in regard to online tutoring. Caposella questions the effect of the absence of body language and tone of voice. Summarizing Michael Spooner, Capposella questions the effect of a lack of interaction and the students' responses to online tutors' comments. Capposella also utilizes Stuart Blythe's warning to address theoretical issues: "Do we want to do this? What do we gain and what do we lose?" (Caposella 108). The remainder of the chapter discusses advantages and disadvantages of various avenues of approach for online tutoring.

In the essay "Protocols and Process in Online Tutoring," the authors write, "Collaborative, face-to-face communication has become a hallmark of the work that peer tutors do in campus writing centers" (Cooper 91). They refer to "The Practical Tutor," in which the authors, Emily Meyer and Louise Smith, "emphasize that conversation is the precursor to development of ideas on paper. Conversation is a familiar aspect of our oral world, and it is necessary for the writer's transition into the written world" (Cooper 91). They further note that "online tutoring stretches and stresses the viability" of the good principle of communication and "tutors question whether the success of face-to-face tutoring can be transferred to online tutoring" (Cooper 92).

The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring offers a section based upon how to tutor online. The first basic policy mentioned is "no writing center we know of allows writers to drop off their drafts and come back for comments. We involve writers in the revision process, make them part of the dialogue in hopes that they will not only produce a better text but become better writers. We want online tutoring to offer the same benefits to writers" (Gillespie 142). The

remainder of the section offers suggestions on quick responses, establishing context and a friendly tone, and reading the text.

In the Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors, Leigh Ryan lists the many advantages and disadvantages of online tutoring. She mentions both the lack of stereotypes and the lack of body language. She mentions the aspect of convenience for distance learners and the inconvenience of the wait period for feedback. In light of all advantages and disadvantages, she notes, "just as in face-to-face tutoring, the tutor's ultimate focus should remain on helping the student to become a better writer rather that on simply making this pariticular piece of writing more effective" (Ryan 57).

Is Smarthinking an online writing lab or a jiffy-editing service?

To answer this question, I pulled Webster's II College Dictionary off the shelf. The word "online" is defined as "accessible by means of a computer." The Smarthinking program is, indeed, accessible through use of a computer, so it meets this requirement. "Writing" is defined as "a written work, esp. a literary composition." E-structors are reading students' written works, so Smarthinking's word choice works here as well. The word laboratory, when not being used in a scientific context, is defined as "a place for practice, observation, or testing." Without stretching the meaning of these words completely, one cannot claim there is any practicing, observing, or testing happening within Smarthinking, so it fails to meet this definition. However, the word "service" is defined as "work done for others as an occupation or business" or "an act of assistance." According to these definitions, "online writing service" would be a more appropriate name than "online writing lab." But there is another option.

According to Webster's II New College Dictionary, the word "jiffy" means "a short period of time." Smarthinking's promise to offer "personalized assistance within 24 hours"

(Educational Services 1) would qualify it as a jiffy service. The word "edit" is defined as "to prepare for publication or presentation, as by adapting or correcting." According to the students who participated in the original survey, this definition accurately describes Smarthinking's assistance. Participant 43 noted that the e-structor "made corrections and suggestions on my paper." Participant 40 pointed out, "they correct your mistakes," and participant 14 wrote "I didn't have to talk to anyone but [my essay] got corrected." Participant 33 praised the program, saying, "your paper does look much better," and participant 39 noted that the strength of the program "is that your final paper will be more polished." Students submit their documents to Smarthinking and receive a version that has been "corrected." These students' essays have not been read by an online writing lab; they have been read by a Jiffy-Editing Service.

Conclusions

Smarthinking claims to be an educational organization based in Washington D.C. It currently provides a type of feedback service in math and through an online writing lab. It claims to offer "personalized assistance" (Educational Services 1); in reality, all the student ever sees are words on a screen and a marked-up copy of his/her essay. Although the program was not designed to replace traditional, face-to-face tutoring, it was designed eventually to offer assistance in all core studies and "serve the roughly 3,600 higher education institutions across the country" (Smarthinking: It's How You Know 2). That is a huge goal. However, in a society so dominated by the computer industry, the program's goals should not be difficult to implement. However, just because we, as a society, can do something, it does not mean that we should.

By analyzing the information I gathered from surveys, it seems that students are pleased with the Smarthinking program. However, students are not always aware of what is best for them. A good majority of students who are pleased with the program are pleased because of the

convenience of the program. Although convenience is a positive attribute, if students are not really learning enough, convenience is not of much importance. According to the interviews and follow-up surveys, many students did not feel they were learning anything useful for more than just the essay they had submitted. While it is wonderful that a student can receive an A on an assignment an e-structor edited, is it feasible to believe the student will repeat the performance without the e-structor's help? I think not. Although 2% of respondents rated the Smarthinking experience as poor, and 15% rated it wonderful, it is important to remember why students rated it such. If convenience is the major aspect students are pleased with (In other words, they are more pleased with the convenience of the program than the help they are receiving.), I doubt whether Smarthinking is really helping students become better writers.

My personal experiences with Smarthinking have been both positive and negative. On the first essay I submitted, the e-structor misread the prompt and offered me all the wrong solutions. Furthermore, he/she edited my sentences, changing my voice and my meaning. A more inexperienced writer may have followed this e-structor's comments and placed errors in his/her paper. On the second paper I submitted, the e-structor was quite helpful in pointing out areas in which I needed to add development and clarity. On the third paper I submitted, the e-structor focused solely on grammar errors (also known as typos) even though I had noted the paper was a first draft and I was only looking for focus, organization and development (FOD) comments. A more inexperienced writer may have assumed that his/her FOD was fine and proceeded to work on grammar. On the fourth paper I submitted, the e-structor lacked objectivity and asked irrelevant questions. An inexperienced writer may have taken the e-structor's suggestions and damaged the focus of his/her paper. However, I am an experienced writer, and I knew the first e-structor was destroying both my voice and meaning, the third was missing my FOD errors, and

the last was simply being defensive instead of helpful. The conclusion I draw from this is a few experienced writers may actually benefit from the availability of a jiffy-editing service. After all, it is much more convenient to submit a document to Smarthinking for an editing session than it is to actually proofread a document for typos and grammar errors. However, I believe Smarthinking should be providing writing assistance to students who are in need of it, not a grammar-check to students who are too lazy to proofread.

Many instructors here at MJC have had their students submit essays to Smarthinking, and some of them are pleased with the results. By forcing students to submit their documents to Smarthinking, the instructor can receive a "sanity check." He/she can discover if his/her prompt is clear and the grading process is simplified because the e-structor has performed much of his/her work for him/her. However, they do not believe their students are learning much from the e-structors. While a student may improve the one essay he/she submits, the student's overall writing skills are not improving. Through interaction (teaching brainstorming methods and/or grammar rules) students can learn how to improve their writing skills. Unfortunately, the mission of the Smarthinking program is not to simplify an instructor's job; it is to "serve the changing needs of today's students" (About Us 1). Smarthinking may be allowing convenience for distance education students and anonymity for embarrassed students. However, if all Smarthinking is doing is servicing the needs for convenience and anonymity, I believe they are doing students a disservice by not meeting their major need – to improve their writing skills. Because the goal of Smarthinking is to serve the needs of students, I do not believe it is fully successful.

When I began this paper I held the belief that Smarthinking's online writing lab ran contradictory to one major principle of writing centers – interaction. This assumption is proven

by the numerous e-mail responses on the subject of dropping papers off and the tutor-training texts I researched. Due to its utter lack of interaction between student and e-structor, Smarthinking's online writing lab is running contradictory to a basic writing center policy.

Relying solely on definitions from Webster's II College Dictionary, it is clear that Smarthinking's name for its writing assistance is incorrect. A more appropriate name would be "Jiffy Editing Service." The question arising from this is whether or not students can receive long-term benefits from an editing service. The obvious and simple answer is no; students cannot, in the long term, benefit from an editing service. Having someone correct their papers and edit sentences into them with no interaction, discussion, or opportunity to integrate new information will not help students become better, more thoughtful writers. It may benefit them temporarily in that they may receive A's on their edited documents, but if they cannot repeat the performance on their own, they will continue to struggle with writing and receive no long-term benefits. Thus, a jiffy editing service is not what students need; they need real assistance that will teach them skills to improve their writing.

My first interest in the Smarthinking program was how, or if, the e-structors would approach the situation of meeting students' various needs. Because of the complete lack of interaction with the students, e-structors cannot feasibly discern what type of student (visual or auditory learner, etc) they are tutoring. What may be clear to one student may be confusing to another. Without being able to discern what type of student they are tutoring, the e-structors are forced to approach all students in the same manner. Furthermore, even if Smarthinking utilized interaction for e-structors to discern what type of student they are tutoring, the e-structors would still have no way to compensate for student's different learning styles. Thus, they may neglect a student's particular needs and fail in their attempt to help the student learn.

My second interest in the Smarthinking program was how, based on their procedure, the creators could avoid the stereotype of being an editing service. After researching this idea, I do not believe they can if they continue functioning in the manner they currently are. From the responses I gathered from other writing centers and a look at tutor-training texts, it is clear that interaction is a major part of the learning process; learning rarely takes place in isolation. Writing centers do not allow students to drop off papers and come back for them later because this process is considered editing. This breach in writing center policy led me to the belief that not only is Smarthinking an editing service but it also runs contrary to some of the practices (editing and lack of interaction) to which most writing centers adhere.

My third interest in the Smarthinking program was how, or if, the e-structors could interact with their students. From personal experience and research, I realized that they simply did not. This is unfortunate because I believe interaction is a major part of helping students learn and other forms of online tutoring can and do offer opportunities for interactive collaboration.

My fourth interest in the Smarthinking program arose from an article written by Craig Vetter. He claims the computer era is leading to worse writing skills. Due to this claim, I had to wonder if an online writing lab was an effective solution to poor writing skills. Unfortunately for Vetter's claim, our society is becoming increasingly dependent on computers. As the popularity of distance education courses rises, the construction of online writing labs is inevitable. I do not believe the computer era is making students' writing worse; I believe the students' dependence on someone, or something, to do their work for them is making their writing worse. Based on what I have learned through my research, I have a few suggestions for improvement which, I believe, will help Smarthinking become a useful tool for students to utilize instead of a crutch on which they may become dependent.

The first thing I believe Smarthinking needs to do is offer some way for students to interact with e-structors. Smarthinking could post a page on its site that contains the names, pictures, qualifications and e-mail addresses of its e-structors. This would eliminate some of the critique of Smarthinking being impersonal. More importantly, it would allow students the opportunity to contact their e-structors with questions about comments they receive. Another idea would be to have chat rooms connected to Smarthinking's homepage. By doing this, students could actually interact with their tutors and discuss their papers, clarify their prompts, and have the possibility of actually learning from the e-structors. Until real-time interaction is provided, I do not believe the Smarthinking program can be an effective answer to poor writing skills.

I am extremely familiar with computers and the Internet. Thus the login and submission processes for Smarthinking seemed simple to me. Unfortunately, not all people are as familiar with the Internet as I am. I recently attended a class where the instructor was attempting to help her students register for Smarthinking. With a complete demonstration, it still required over a half hour to get thirty students registered. According to complaints from students and my personal experience in helping students sign up, it would be wise for the creators of Smarthinking to consider simplifying their login and submission processes.

Another suggestion I have is regarding the way in which e-structors comment on papers. First, instead of simply *telling* students to change something, they should explain why something needs to be changed and perhaps teach a general rule (i.e. each paragraph of a paper should help prove a thesis statement or each paragraph should only contain one topic). E-structors could even utilize this plan when correcting grammar mistakes. Rather than simply rewording a sentence, they should incorporate a rule that supports the change (i.e. only use a comma before a

coordinating conjunction if a subject and verb come before and after it). Furthermore, e-structors should not edit any sentences directly into papers especially when this editing changes either the students' voice or meaning. The only thing this teaches students is how to plagiarize. My second suggestion regarding comments is e-structors should be aware that typing in all capitals is, in basic Internet etiquette, considered shouting. If e-structors want their comments within documents to be more visible, they can either type them in bold, italics or both. Although this is only based on Internet etiquette, I believe it would help students to feel more positive about their writing and the e-structors' comments. My final suggestion regarding comments is the e-structors need to ask more questions instead of giving absolute directions. They need to relinquish control and put the responsibility in the hands of the students for whom they are reading. Appropriate comments can be a useful learning tool; therefore, e-structors need to comment in ways that enhance learning.

My final suggestion for the improvement of Smarthinking's online writing lab is one that I believe will help students learn better writing skills: When commenting on students' papers, e-structors should follow a process approach -- the writing center philosophy of working on focus, organization, development and logic in first drafts. Rather than noting surface errors (grammar, formatting, citations, etc) in a first draft, e-structors should ask questions regarding focus, organization, development and logic. When the paper is focused, organized, developed and logical, only then should e-structors make note of surface errors. After all, it is illogical for a student's paper to be grammatically correct if it does not follow the proper structure or contain appropriate content. By following this procedure, e-structors would be reinforcing the idea of writing being a process in which content is most important. Furthermore, following a process approach would allow writing centers and Smarthinking to work in conjunction with each other.

Implications for Further Study

Smarthinking also offers a math lab, which I did not research at all. Because math does not pertain to the WC, analyzing the math lab probably would not be a good paper topic; however, one could compare student responses/learning from the "online writing lab" and math lab. Such a paper may allow Smarthinking to see more productive ways to run the writing lab.

The creators of Smarthinking recently asked the participants of its pilot program to respond to an online survey. While the survey was allegedly designed to "improve [the Smarthinking] service to meet the needs of students" (Smarthinking Student Survey 1), a majority of the questions dealt with the amount of money students are willing to pay for the service. Among several regarding money, the following questions were asked: "Which of the following products have you purchased online?" and "About how much money have you spent purchasing products and services online?" (Smarthinking Student Survey 13). Considering the advertisements that already appear on the "Study Break" page, the inference is that more advertisements will soon appear. An interesting paper could be written discussing whether Smarthinking is the educational service it claims to be or a profit-oriented business.

Smarthinking is not the only online writing lab in existence; others do exist. One should research and explore policies and procedures of various labs and compare them to one another. This could prove beneficial to the creators of Smarthinking as they revise their program. Moreover, it would provide ideas and examples to MJC should administrators decide to take the WC online or fund the services of an online writing lab.

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You have recently received comments about your writing from the online writing lab, Smarthinking. I would like your response to these comments and this experience as a whole. Please respond to each question thoroughly and honestly as I will be using these responses for my research paper, The Ideal Writing Center. When you are finished, return this survey to your instructor or to Holly Moe in the Writing Center. Thank you for your time.

1. Rate the overall experience. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
   poor wonderful
   What did you like or dislike? Why?

2. How helpful was the e-structor? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
   poor wonderful
   Explain your response.

3. Rate the service on convenience. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
   poor wonderful
   Explain your response.

4. What flaws, if any, do you see with this type of tutoring?

5. What strengths, if any, do you see with this type of tutoring?

6. What suggestions do you have for improvement of these services?

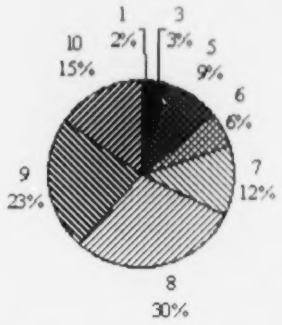
7. Do you prefer online tutoring or face-to-face tutoring as offered in the Writing Center?

8. Explain your answer to number 7. Please be thorough and provide examples or reasoning.

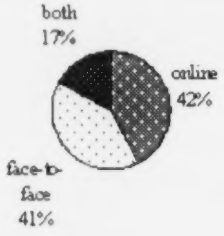
9. Will you utilize the online tutoring service again? Why or why not?

10. Feel free to add any additional comments.

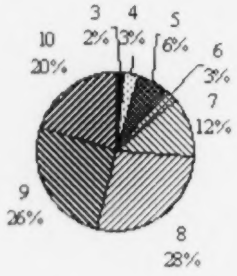
Graph A: Rate the overall experience



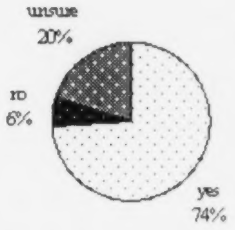
Graph D: Do you prefer online or face-to-face tutoring?



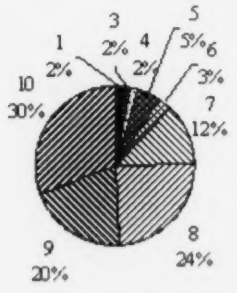
Graph B: How helpful was the e-structor?



Graph E: Will you use the online service again?



Graph C: Rate the service on convenience



Follow-up Student Survey Regarding Smarthinking

To finish my research paper, I need more information from you, the users of Smarthinking. Please answer the following questions honestly and thoroughly. Thank you again for your time.

1. What level English class are you currently enrolled in?

_____

2. Are you a native or non-native English speaker?

_____

3. Have you (or will you) use Smarthinking on your own without being instructed to do so?

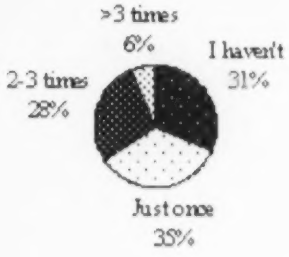
4. How many times have you used Smarthinking on your own?
[ ] I haven't [ ] Just once [ ] 2-3 times [ ] more than 3 times

5. How often do you intend to use Smarthinking next semester?
[ ] I won't [ ] 1-2 times [ ] 3-5 times [ ] 5-10 times [ ] consistently

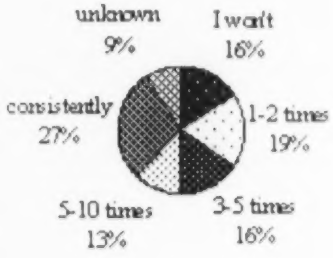
6. What is the e-structor commenting on more in your papers? (check one)
[ ] focus [ ] organization [ ] development [ ] grammar

7. What are you learning about your writing from the e-structor's comments? (name things)

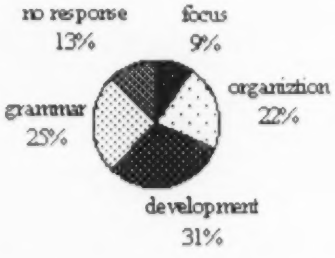
Graph 1: How often have you used Smarthinking on your own?



Graph 2: How often will you use Smarthinking next semester?



Graph 3: What kinds of comments are most prominent?



Smarthinking Personal Interview Questions

1. Name: _____
2. What level of English are you currently enrolled in?
   [ ] 183 [ ] 184 [ ] other

3. How many times have you submitted documents to Smarthinking?
   [ ] Just once [ ] 2-3 times [ ] more than 3 times

4. When in the writing process did you start using Smarthinking?
   [ ] rough draft [ ] 2nd draft [ ] 3rd draft [ ] final

5. What kinds of comments are most prominent?
   [ ] focus [ ] organization [ ] development [ ] grammar

6. What do you do with the comments?

7. What are you learning about your writing from Smarthinking that you can utilize now AND in the future?

8. What do you like about Smarthinking?

9. What do you dislike about Smarthinking?

10. In the future, will you submit documents to Smarthinking? Why or why not?

11. What suggestions, if any, do you have for improving Smarthinking?

12. Do you have any other comments regarding Smarthinking?

Interview Questions
(What do instructors think of Smarthinking?)

1. Name _____

2. What level(s) of English do you teach?
   [ ] 50 [ ] 101 [ ] above 101

3. What level students have you had submit papers to Smarthinking?
   [ ] 50 [ ] 101 [ ] above 101

4. How many times have you had your students submit their papers to Smarthinking?

5. Did you collect the e-structors' comments? [ ] yes [ ] no

6. What kinds of comments were more prominent?
   [ ] focus [ ] organization [ ] development [ ] grammar

7. What do you think your students are learning about their writing that they can utilize now AND in the future?

8. What do you like about the Smarthinking program?

9. What do you dislike about the Smarthinking program?

10. Will you require future students to submit papers to Smarthinking? Why or why not?

11. If future students will be required to submit papers, how often do you intend to require it?

12. What suggestions, if any, do you have for improving the Smarthinking program?